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ABSTRACT

Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge, a statement signed by 27 educators intended to sustain the momentum for reform in American education, is discussed and critiqued. The author declined to sign the Statement and was asked to critically evaluate it. The Statement presents nine major issues, follows with a discussion of each, and concludes with a set of recommendations concerning each issue. Although the report criticizes the national reform reports for not dealing adequately with the topic of youth character, the Statement avoids such strategies as values education or sex education, and seems not to come to grips with the elements of character development which require cognitive and affective development and the creation of a climate of community in the school. The recommendations are viewed by this critic as restatements of the recommendations from some of the national reform reports such as "A Nation at Risk." He believes the recommendations are conservative and traditional and stray from the focus on character development of youth. By attempting to deal with the whole of education and schooling rather than those issues and recommendations concerning character development, the result is a Statement which is too traditional, too conservative, and too general. (Author/DWH)

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Abstract

Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge--The Thanksgiving Statement-- One Assessment of a Statement on Education Policy

Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge, a statement signed by 27 educators intended to sustain the momentum for reform in American education, is discussed and critiqued. The Statement presents nine major issues, follows with a discussion of each, and concludes with a set of recommendations concerning each issue.

Although the report criticizes the national reform reports for not dealing adequately with the topic of youth character, especially in light of such problems as youth suicide, homicide, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, etc., the Statement itself avoids such strategies as values education, sex education, etc. and seems not to come to grips with the elements of character development which require both cognitive and affective development and the creation of a climate, of polity, of community in the school.

Eight other issues are discussed but they seem not to deal either directly or indirectly with character development, at least in the view of one critic. The recommendations are often restatements of the recommendations from some of the national reform reports such as A Nation at Risk. In this critic's view, the recommendations are conservative and traditional and stray from the focus on character development of youth. By attempting to deal with the whole of education and schooling rather than those issues and recommendations concerning character development, the result is a Statement which is too traditional, too conservative, and too general.

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Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge--The Thanksgiving Statement-- One Assessment of a Statement on Education Policy

A. Harry Passow
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New York, New York 10027

Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge [Sustaining the Momentum for Reform in American Education] is a statement to which 27 scholars, educators, and policymakers subscribed, which was issued on Thanksgiving Day, November 21, 1984. Three of the signers of the statement have commented on the Statement. As one who declined to sign the Statement, I am pleased to be asked to critically evaluate it.

I must begin by noting, and Ed Wynne will corroborate this, that I had considerable ambivalence about signing or not signing. Only as I was communicating my decision to Ed did it become clear to me as to why I was having such ambivalence and why I should not endorse the statement. The style of presentation is to present nine major issues, to follow with a discussion of each issue, and to conclude with a set of recommendations concerning the issue. For the most part, I had no problem with the statement of the issue; I had some problems with the discussion of the issue; and I usually had considerable difficulty with the recommendations which followed the discussion. In the end, I did not believe that the report's recommendations provided direction and guidance for coming to grips with the issues posed. On the opening page, after expressing sympathy for the themes found in the reform reports of the 1980s and lauding the National Commission on

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A paper prepared for Session 51.14 [Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge--The Thanksgiving Statement--Some Researchers Assess a Statement on Education Policy (Symposium, SIG/Socialization to Adulthood)] at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, 4 April 1985, Chicago, IL.

Excellence in Education for its warning of a "rising tide of mediocrity," the authors observe that "despite their diverse recommendations, the reports bypassed the critical issue of youth character. When the issue has been addressed, the reports have failed to offer concrete, practical measures, applicable to all educational levels, to deal with the problems we identify." (p. 1) I heartily concur. My problem is that this Statement does identify significant problems of developing character but its "concrete, practical measures" are hardly distinguishable from the national reform reports it criticizes.

For instance, the Executive Summary begins:

> The general silence, or timidity, about the topic of youth character is especially incongruous at this time. Our national rates of youth death by suicide and homicide and levels of adolescent out-of-wedlock births, are at, or near the highest points in American history--since 1607. (p. 1)
>
> Our Statement analyzes the critical challenge implicit in such statistics. The analysis recommends specific steps which can be taken to deal with the existing deficiencies in our schools' character policies....Our proposal bypasses a number of controversial and problematic topics such as values education, sex education, and the proposed constitutional amendment facilitating school prayer. We believe other constructive steps can be taken which are more effective and less divisive. (p. 1)

It seems to me that youth suicide, homicide, out-of-wedlock births, etc. are critical problems for our youth culture but certainly developing character goes far beyond these aspects. And, I am unsure how or why one can deal with these aspects of youth character avoiding values education, sex education, etc.. I am unconvinced that "raising academic expectations for all students" will reduce suicide or teen-age pregnancies. I am convinced that character development is a matter of both cognitive and affective nurturance which requires both direct instruction and, perhaps more important, the creation of a climate, of polity, of community in this

place called school. What the authors of the Statement describe as "schools in general ... not doing enough to counter the symptoms of serious decline in youth character," is in my view, a generalization with which I would not argue but it represents a rather narrow concept which focuses on pathology, not on what constitutes a positive, healthy, affirmative curriculum and learning experience. I thoroughly concur that "good character is not generated solely by more homework, rigorous traditional grading, and better pupil discipline." And I throughly agree with the statement that "Character development and efficient cooperation are as much areas of excellence as academic learning." But, except for the recommendations dealing with the first issue of character development, it seems to me that the authors recommend precisely the same kinds of toughening of academic standards as found in the national reports. For example:

> -- Schools and agencies setting school policy should increase academic standards: in-school time should be directed toward purposeful, demanding, adult-monitored activities that advance learning; pupils should be regularly and frequently assigned homework that is collected, graded and returned. Promotion and graduation standards should be clearly articulated and enforced....

I am unconvinced that the unheated buildings and cold-water showers of British independent (i.e., public) schools are really great builders of character. Certainly schools need to reassess their curricula, their instructional strategies, their rewards and punishment systems, their climates for learning and living, their ethos, their personal and social relationships, etc.. More is not enough; we need to reassess the whole web of relationships, interactions, interventions--both affective and cognitive-- which impact on character development. Improving academic performance and raising academic expectations for all students are necessary but

not sufficient elements of character development as I understand the nature of youth character.

The Statement recognizes that profound changes have taken place in the family and the home--and one might add all other aspects of society as well. The Statement asserts:

> Careful discussion of youth character must recognize that innumerable forces beyond schools help shape our young people. Families, media, neighborhoods, churches all play important roles--for both good and bad. (p. 7)

However, how schools might work with these non-school educative agencies is not discussed. The recommendations include such suggestions as the assignment of students to group responsibilities for academic and school-related activities which stress individual and group excellence; school and community service projects; maintenance of high continuity of relationships among pupils and among pupils and teachers through homerooms, subschools and extracurricular activities; providing frequent and high quality ceremonial activitie; and more publicity about general youth conduct trends by the federal government and other agencies. I was looking for something more substantial in terms of building a community in the school through the formal and informal, structured and unstructured instructional, interpersonal, and governance relationships. I read into some of the recommendations concerning "developing good character in the young" hints at this but not clear, direct proposals of the kind I looked for.

The Statement urges that we improve academic performance by raising academic expectations for all students. The decline in SAT scores, grade inflation, comparisons with Japanese student achievement, etc. are cited to restate the case that "our students are learning far less than they should." (p. 9)

This is, of course, the theme in most, if not all, of the national reports which appeared in 1983-84. The Statement argues that "if we have the will, we have the knowledge to increase school learning;" that by increasing the amount of time for instruction and demanding purposeful educational activities; by using computer-assisted instruction which, the report states, "is accumulating an excellent record of results;" and by using what we know in the way of proven and effective techniques, we can raise academic achievement. It is recommended that "schools and agencies setting school policy should consider their current instructional techniques, and they should assess their effectiveness in the light of available research." I would have thought that they should consider their effectiveness in terms of the outcomes. But more important, I find it difficult to accept the notion that the low standards and poor academic achievement are a matter of <u>will</u>-- if we only will it and expect more, we will get more. I have seen too many teachers "teach their hearts out" without achieving desired results. Raising academic performance involves much more than raising academic requirements. We do have insights into techniques and approaches but these are not implemented simply because of lack of will.

As one who has worked with education of the academically talented for the past thirty-one years, I certainly support "maintaining demands on the academically talented" but my experience suggests that limiting efforts for the academically talented to heightened academic demands, to publishing test scores, to multiple types of diplomas, to encouraging qualified teachers to handle classes for the talented does not contribute to talent development along the dimensions I think are appropriate. Where do the creativity, the productive behavior, the initiative and motivation for independent study,

the opportunity to persevere and all of the other things that education of the talented should provide beyond high SAT scores and good grades, come into the recommendations?

I thoroughly agree that "the heart of a sound educational system is the quality of its teachers. I can't argue that "the central challenge is to establish professional standards for teaching as an occupation, for the teacher role, and for instruction, and to create conditions in schools that allow these standards to be put into widespread practice." (p. 16) The recommendations, not unlike those of A Nation at Risk, are for career ladder and master teacher arrangements and for establishing "school conditions that permit effective teaching," including "the provision of adequate learning materials, firm but fair discipline codes for students, appropriate criteria for selecting and monitoring principals, and a school-wide dedication to teaching and learning as a top priority." Other recommendations deal with better recruitment into teaching, teacher education transformed into a graduate level program, and alternative career routes into teaching--all of which have been with us for quite some time and have been tried from time to time. Yes, we should do all of that but perhaps greater focus on effective staff development practices might yield better results.

There are recommendations for upgrading curriculum and textbooks which concur with the current efforts to raise the requirements in the basic academic subjects, reduce the electives and options, and taking more science, mathematics and foreign languages. The Statement urges pressure on textbook publishers to provide "knowledge-based" books.

I thoroughly disagree with the Statement's analysis of the issue and the recommendations made concerning "providing choice for parents

and pupils...among different forms of schools and school systems." It is, as the report points out, an admittedly complex issue. I disagree with the statement of the issue, with the discussion of the issue, and with the set of eight recommendations because I distrust the motives of the advocates, especially President Ronald Reagan.

While I cannot argue that education policymaking and research needs revitalization, the notion that almost 95% of the persons in policy-making positions--i.e.,, school administrators--entered the field via the teaching profession and that this is bad is rather a simplistic view. The recommendations that follow that "states should eliminate all requirements that school administrators must be former teachers, or that they possess formal training in education per se" suggests that school administrators, corporate executives (or middle management people), and business men are pretty much interchangeable and that there is nothing special about providing educational leadership which cannot be learned in a few days in the principal's office, with better educational policies emerging are, in my view, questionnable. I do agree that we do have problems with improving the nature and quality of educational research but I am not sure that I accept the RAND model as the appropriate one. I wish that the National Institute of Education might be less politicized than it has been but obviously with the new Secretary for Education and the new NIE Director it will become more so rather than less so. There are a number of sessions at this AERA Annual Meeting which deal with policy-making and research and there are varied and diverse positions concerning the nature of appropriate educational research which will contribute to improved attainment of agreed-upon educational goals. Having been part of the action research vs. basic research con-

troversy some thirty or so years ago, I am all too familiar with the arguments about and criticisms of educational research. Yes, we need to revitalize both policymaking and research, especially if we recognize the relationship which should exist between them.

The Statement calls for reevaluating undergraduate education, noting that "the quality of American undergraduate education is as much in need of careful scrutiny as that of elementary/secondary schooling, and so are public policies bearing on undergraduate education." I wish that the Statement had focused on the questions of quality of undergraduate education and not made the recommendations it does concerning Federal student aid policy.

The last issue is that of providing accurate information on schools and pupils: "Clear, well-organized statistics on school operations and school effects are indispensible for improving education." The Statement recommends collecting and making public data on student achievement on a school-by-school basis, linking standardized international tests to local testing, more achievement testing which measures specific subject-matter competencies, year-by-year records of dropouts, etc.. These are the kinds of statistics (with the exception of the IEA testing) which one finds commonly available in most school districts. I would have preferred data on character development of students, on their affective growth, on their service to the school and society, on their citizenship, and on the other areas which are more meaningful but also more difficult to measure and assess. I do not object to the kind of statistics the Statement suggests but I think they are easier to provide and are already being provided by most schools while the domains which concern me are equally vital but go unreported.

The Statement concludes with a chart allocating responsibility for action to some thirteen "persons and institutions immediately able to help implement recommendations" in the nine areas discussed and urges recommiting "ourselves to our individual and group responsibilities to maintain" the effort begun with A Nation at Risk and the other reform reports.

As with A Nation at Risk, I found the Statement conservative and traditional. As I told Ed Wynne, what I was seeking and arguing for is something different from the analysis and proposals of the reform reports of the 1970s (which seem to have been expunged from the records since there is practically no reference to them in the current reports) and the analysis and proposals of the reform reports of the 1980s, something different from the Committee of Ten Report of 1893 and tne Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education of 1918. I felt that the Statement accepted the analyses and recommendations of the reform reports of the 1980s too readily. And, as a policy statement it suffers from the same problem that all of these reports suffer from, the need to deal with policies too generally and the failure to come to grips with issues about how change and reform actually take place in the schools and classrooms. As I read the news clippings which Ed Wynne supplied me with concerning the Statement, I find that the writers have latched on to the suicide, homicide, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies and the need for building moral character. I wish that the authors had focused on developing character and its significance rather than try to encompass all that is involved in sustaining the momentum for reform in American education. The contribution would have been more helpful since character development is basically ignored in the refrom reports which

have been issued during the past two years. When one reads A Nation Responds, the items in Education Week, the articles and news items in such journals as Kappan and other sources, there is a good deal of momentum for reform with governors, legislators, state education departments, local school systems, and various other agencies and institutions rushing madly to produce mandates, regulations, and policies for change. That seems not to be the problem. The problem is the direction of that momentum. The Statement would have been more helpful had it focused on developing character and not tried to tie in to the tide of reform reports with which we have been inundated.

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